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ABSTRACT

The Resource and Referral Service (RRS), is a central services contractor to the Research and Development Exchange (RDx), which facilitates the flow of outputs from Research and Development (R&D) based organizations, specializing in fast responses to questions from states transmitted by the Regional Exchanges on R&D in education, testing, and evaluation in elementary and secondary education. This paper describes the mission of RRS and the Data Bank which provides information for responses to requests. A discussion of services is also included, followed by issues in the development and use of R&D resources, and the need for evaluation and research in this area. (Author/MBR)

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DEVELOPING MATERIAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES:

THE RESOURCE AND REFERRAL SERVICE

by

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Developing Material and Organizational Resources: The Resource and Referral Service

by

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The Resource and Referral Service (RRS) is a central services contractor to the Research and Development Exchange (RDx). RRS specializes in fast turn-around responses to questions from States transmitted by the Regional Exchanges. The RDx network provides for responses to questions at each level of the networking system. Thus, information needs should be answered at the local, intermediate, state, regional, and national levels. RRS expects to receive only those questions which have not been answered completely by states and Regional Exchanges.

This paper describes the mission of the Resource and Referral Service. Emphasis is placed on an explanation of the Data Bank which provides the information for responses to requests. A discussion of services provided to Regional Exchanges follows. Then attention is directed to issues in the development and use of R&D resources. Finally, the need for evaluation and research is identified. The information in this paper is intended to be a sketch of the services offered; RRS would welcome the opportunity to respond to questions about its services in greater detail.

The Mission of RRS

The Resource and Referral Service is designed to eliminate the unnecessary duplication of services among Regional Exchanges (Rxs) and to link RDx with R&D

¹The views represented in this paper are solely those of the author; they do not necessarily reflect the position or policy of the sponsor, the National Institute of Education, and no official endorsement by the NIE should be inferred.

resources. In particular, RRS focuses on new and emerging resource organizations (including products and people) which are developing capabilities in innovative areas. Usually these areas emerge in response to specific needs such as school energy needs.

With a Data Bank of over 500 resource organizations, RRS promises fast turn-around responses to questions received from the Regional Exchanges. This response service is discussed in a later section of this paper. This collaborative relationship with the Rxs allows them to tap a national Data Bank in an efficient and effective manner on a wide range of topics. However, careful guidelines are used to insure cooperative and non-duplicative activities with such dissemination networks as the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC). For example, RRS stores no documents on substantive selected topics, only tools to access R&D organizational resources such as catalogues, brochures, directories and so forth. Document identification and input into a nation-wide network is a function performed by ERIC Clearinghouses; RRS may, on occasion, recommend a specific document already in the ERIC document collection; however, this is an exception, not the rule. Computer-based search capabilities exist in most of the states and the Regional Exchanges at the present time. Frequently an ERIC search has been conducted before RRS is contacted. Whenever RRS recommends a document for review, most frequently it is (1) under development, or (2) a landmark document, one which has been recommended by many persons.

Building the RRS Data Bank of Resource Organizations

The keystone of the RRS bridge between dissemination operators and R&D resource organizations is the Data Bank of resource organizations. This Data Bank contains over 500 resource organizations at the present time in various stages of processing. The scope of these organizations is quite broad ranging

from nation-wide associations such as the National Education Association to organizations which tend to operate within a given region such as the Teaching Research Center for Competency-Based Education in Oregon. An attempt is being made to narrow search activities to the priority areas for RDx, namely basic skills and competency-based education. Initial efforts to identify resource organizations in these areas were thwarted by the need to respond to inquiries from States being transmitted by the Regional Exchanges. These inquiries addressed many different topics. RRS contacts with resource organizations generated from responses to these inquiries covered many topics. In general, responses to inquiries and the growth of the RRS Data Bank has been at the elementary and secondary school levels in areas related to competency-based education, evaluation, and testing. What follows is a brief discussion of procedures for soliciting nominations of organizations, their selection, and incorporation into the Data Bank.

1. Organizations are contacted as a result of a response to a specific request for information, the development of a Mini-List² or referral to RRS by a satisfied user.
2. Usually this contact is in the form of a telephone call or follow-up letter requesting additional information.
3. This information is received, compared against pre-determined criteria which are discussed in the next paragraph, and, if successful, an organizational profile is written by an RRS staff member.
4. This organizational profile is mailed to the contact person at the resource organization for verification.
5. The revised, approved profile is placed in the Data Bank with ERIC-compatible descriptors.
6. A card is placed in the Update File as a reminder to review the information for changes within the next twelve months.

²A Mini-List is a list of about twelve resource organizations on topics of general interest to several audiences. They are used by RRS and the Regional Exchanges as a shelf product to respond to high-frequency questions. Page 6 contains a list of past and future topics.

The information in the Data Bank should become more useful to clients and to RRS as more is learned about each resource organization. At the present time the following criteria are used to screen organizations:

1. Does the organization provide R&D based information?³
2. Is the organization currently active?
3. Does the organization serve user requests for information and/or services?
4. Will the organization serve a broad user group (e.g. statewide, regional, or national)?
5. Does the organization have information/services/products that are immediately available to users?
6. Is the quality of the information/services/products provided by the organization average or above?

It is very difficult for RRS to obtain comprehensive answers to these questions within a brief period of time. However, the knowledge gained about a resource organization is cumulative. With the assistance of evaluative information planned for collection by RRS, it should be possible to become increasingly well-informed about the performance capability of each organization in the Data Bank. The amount of use being made by RRS of each organization is being monitored.

In general, resource organizations should be able to respond to questions quickly with sufficient information to communicate the status of pending R&D outputs (information, services, or products). Careful attention is given to accurate descriptions of resource organization capability. For example the information about resource organizations placed in Mini-Lists is verified by telephone each time a new Mini-List is produced.

³A later section of this paper addresses some of the issues surrounding the definition of "R&D based". See page 7.

Serving Dissemination Operators

A major activity of RRS within the past year was an Information Resources Workshop conducted jointly by RRS, the Midwest Regional Exchange at CEMREL, and the Illinois Office of Education. The purposes of this workshop was to improve participants' ability to (1) provide information services and (2) to use information networks. Persons attended this workshop from the State of Illinois and the CEMREL region. Representatives from other regions attended for the purpose of planning similar workshops within their region. To date, similar workshops are being planned by CEMREL, SEDL, and AEL. This cooperative activity involved speakers from three ERIC Clearinghouses and a state education dissemination agency.

One of the instructional materials prepared for the workshop was a catalogue of databases describing the format and contents of each. Almost thirty databases were included in this version of the catalogue with selected examples of entry displays.⁴ A second version of the catalogue is being prepared for distribution at the June Dissemination Forum. It contains revised database descriptions plus an additional twenty databases and ten clearinghouse descriptions.

A second major type of service provided by RRS to the Regional Exchanges is a quick-response referral service. Questions are received from the Rx's in the form of transactions. The materials in the Data Bank are searched manually and usually additional telephone calls are made to organizations not in the Data Bank. The information obtained from these contacts is received, summarized, and transmitted to the Regional Exchange. Usually, the response is in written form, identifying and describing the resource organizations. On occasion, the letter and/or telephone call is transmitted directly to the person requesting the information from the Rx. This is necessary because of the very short turn-around time

⁴This version of the catalogue, entitled Information Resources for Education is available from The National Center for Research on Vocational Education for \$8.25 per copy.

required by some of the requestors. In all cases, the Regional Exchange receives a written copy of the information provided.

The RRS Mini-Lists provide a third type of service designed to anticipate high frequency questions. It is a convenient means of responding to several audiences with questions on the same general topic. The resource organizations listed usually possess different capabilities to respond to these questions. The user should be selective in requesting information from these organizations. RRS is developing instruments to conduct a follow-up of users of these Mini-Lists. Mini-Lists have been prepared on the following topics:

- Resources For Metric Education
- Resources For School Energy Needs
- Resources For Performance-Based Education State Minimal Requirements
For High School Graduation
- Resources For Upgrading Basic Skills Through Citizen Involvement
- Resources For K-12 Instructional Materials on Women's Educational
Equity
- Resources For Assessing Student Competencies
- Resources For Evaluating The Technical and Professional Performance
of Teachers
- Resources For Innovative Programs For Gifted and Talented Students
- Resources For Developing Individualized Education Programs (IEPs)
For Handicapped Students
- Resources For Improving the Reading Ability of Adults

Future Mini-Lists are being prepared on the following topics:

- School Finance
- Functional Literacy for Grades K-12
- School Violence
- Full Utilization of School Facilities

A limited amount of technical assistance is being provided by RRS at the present time. Most of this activity is associated with the Information Resources Workshop. It is aimed at improving the use of the catalogue of databases and in increasing RRS's understanding of the resource and referral needs of the Regional Exchanges.

Issues in the Development and Use of the R&D Resource Base

The following comments are based on the experience of "operationalizing" a resource and referral service within the broader framework of the R&D Exchange.

The issues identified represent a sample of the concerns present at the beginning of RDx, and to a degree some of them linger today.

1. What constitutes R&D-based information? The rationale for RDx includes the sharing of reliable knowledge with practitioners in the field. The problem comes in defining "reliable knowledge." This is a problem because many of the questions coming to RRS this year require information which is not readily available as documented research findings. Even if it were available, the application of this knowledge would vary from setting to setting. Much of what is transmitted by RRS and the resource organization personnel identified in the Data Bank represents judgments about the application of this knowledge to specific settings. For example, a request to "identify remedial programs for rural students failing to pass minimum competency examinations in English at the 9th grade level," requires a knowledge about the options available for programs in the local settings. In cases like this, RRS determines what prior search activities have been conducted and attempts to provide specific information about organizations, people and products likely to lead to program alternatives. In most cases, final resolution of problems occur at the requestor level. Most requests represent practical problems occurring at local levels within rigid time and cost constraints. The application of R&D-based information requires judgments and interpretations of probable consequences of the use of certain products or alternatives. RRS places the requestor in touch with the most authoritative available sources of advice on the problem.

2. Should the RRS Data Bank be accessed by computer? The answer to this question is becoming more and more important as numbers of resource organizations are added to the Data Bank. A feasibility study to address this question is planned for the next grant period. Two major concerns underlie this issue: (a) the complexity of resource organizations, and (b) the tendency of the information to become out-of-date. The concerns are interrelated.

Many resource organizations, such as the Regional Laboratories and R&D Centers, are complex production-orientated organizations with many different operating divisions. An accurate description of each with an acceptable level of detail requires more space than is normally found on a single-page abstract. To be useful, the information accessed through the computer should contain the names of contact persons for each major division with telephone numbers. Such information becomes out of date quickly.

The technology for searching complex databases is available. Search strategies aimed at identifying specific projects and prospective product outputs from these projects should be possible in the near future. The outputs from such search activity would identify not only the resource organization and the contact person(s), but programs and products if this technology were in place. Various types of lists could be generated with minimum effort.

Assuming the numbers of resource organizations and requests warrant computer access to the Data Bank, several options exist for user groups: (a) it may be used by the RRS staff to search the Data Bank for information to be developed into a response for unique requests; (b) it could be used by the Regional Exchanges to obtain information for broad-based program concerns existing among their clients; or (c) it could be placed with a commercial vendor who would make it available to anyone desiring to use the system. These options, and their consequences, are planned into the design of the feasibility study.

3. Whom does RRS serve? The function of a Resource and Referral Service is to bring the user of R&D-based information in closer contact with authoritative sources. The Regional Exchanges located in R&D laboratories throughout the nation are the vehicles for transmitting knowledge from RRS or any other central support contractor to clients. Usually, the clients are local or state education agencies. The Rxs represent a very important link in the communication

of both requests and response information. They (a) clarify requests from clients, (b) determine the appropriate next steps in the search strategy and (c) transmit the information in a response from RRS to the SEA or LEA client. As such, the Regional Exchange acts as a filter to determine which requests are sent to RRS. This dependency may be beneficial or counter-productive to the interests of the client, depending upon the actions of the Rx and the relationship between RRS and each Rx.

The operational mode of the Regional Exchanges differ widely with some working primarily with state-level programmatic endeavors and others responding to relatively isolated requests which are sent or transmitted by a contact person in the State Education Agency. These variances are reflected in the number of requests received from the Rxs. RRS is attempting to adapt to the different operating styles of the Regional Exchanges.

Evaluation and Research

As a linker between dissemination operators and resource organizations, RRS is working to improve its capacity to serve the needs of the field and to facilitate the flow of outputs from R&D-based organizations. To do this, a series of evaluative data collection instruments is being developed by RRS. These instruments will examine the relationships between RRS and the Rxs, follow-up the transaction log requests from clients, and determine the usefulness of the RRS Mini-Lists. The Regional Exchanges are providing the names and addresses of clients for the transaction logs.

Another line of inquiry is planned to determine and if necessary improve the accessibility of services, products, and people located in R&D organizations. RRS experiences with resource organizations during last few months tend to indicate a need for better identification of outputs actually underway in R&D organizations. As questions from the field are brought to the attention of the

R&D organizations, a possibility exists for positive impact on the production of R&D products. RRS plans to study this process with a view toward opening up the accessibility of resource organizations.

In summary, RRS perceives itself as a critical link in the process of bringing R&D resources to bear on educational problems. It specializes in fast turn-around referral service, but functions in a proactive manner to construct Mini-Lists and other tools to access resources such as the catalogue of databases. The RRS role in the RDx system continues to emerge as RDx matures into a cohesive, functional network. Hopefully, the data collection instruments and the enlarged scope of work for the next contract period will enable RRS to become even more effective in serving the R&D-based information needs in the future.